

Light

...on a new world

*'in Pursuit of
Spring'*

a quarterly magazine focusing
on the Bible and its
message for today

Family at Bethany
Between the Testaments
Jerusalem Conference



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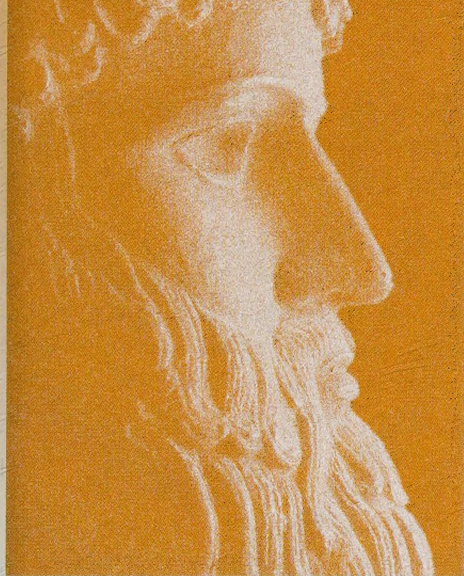
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Volume 24.2

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BIBLE CHARACTERS

The Family at Bethany

The family at Bethany were clearly very special to Jesus. The house where they lived often provided a sanctuary for him on his visits to Jerusalem.

Their home was a place where he could go to be refreshed and encouraged during his short but exhausting ministry. Their company was something Jesus valued highly, for we read: *'Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus'* (John 11.5).

What an accolade! So what was so special about this family?

There were two godly characteristics that the sisters shared. The first characteristic was a willingness to serve; we see this in Martha's tireless devotion to providing for the needs of Jesus and the twelve as recorded by Luke (Luke 10.38-42). In this passage we note how Martha was a living example of Paul's exhortation to the Romans about the importance of *'distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality'* (Romans 12.13). We see the same example of service in Mary, for we read in the gospel of John how she anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair (John 12.1-8).

The second characteristic the sisters shared was a deep desire to listen to the word of life. We see it first in Mary, as she sat at the feet of Jesus, totally absorbed in the words he spoke (Luke 10.39). No doubt Martha too was an

avid listener to the words of Jesus; how else would she have developed the understanding to make the marvellous declaration of faith in him and the hope of resurrection that is recorded by John? (John 11.24, 27)

Although we know very little about the character of Lazarus, we must assume he was of a similar disposition, for we are told that *'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus'*. So a consideration of this family has much to teach us, and we will concentrate on the events recorded in John chapter 11.

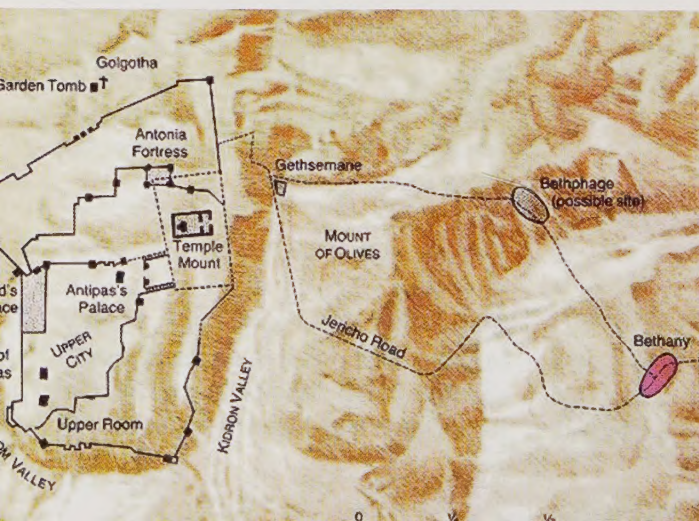
'He whom you love is sick'

This chapter opens with Jesus east of the river Jordan, having moved there because of Jewish threats to stone him for blasphemy. There he received an urgent message from the two sisters: *'Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her*

sister Martha...Therefore the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick"' (John 11.1-3).

This passage contains our first important lesson. Mary and Martha just presented their problem to Jesus. There was no petition for a miraculous cure. There was not even a request for Jesus to come, for they knew that he could heal at a distance. Their faith in Christ was such that they knew he would do whatever was best. All they said was *'he whom you love is sick'*.

Thus the family at Bethany is an example to us. Our tendency is to tell God how He should organise our lives in ways that we see fit. We must learn the lesson of Martha and Mary – they appreciated that Christ knew what was best for Lazarus and indeed for them. In the same way, we must learn to lay our problems and sorrows before God in prayer, and leave the answer to His greater wisdom.



LEFT: Bethany was close to Jerusalem on the road from the city to Jericho and the Jordan valley

RIGHT: an old photochrom of Bethany during the early 1900's



'This sickness is not unto death'

As is so often the case, the immediate answer to the sisters' prayer did not seem to help the situation: *'When Jesus heard that, he said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it"'* (verse 4). It's probably safe to assume that the messenger would take these words of Jesus back to the sisters. However, by the time the messenger had returned to Bethany with the news that *'this sickness is not unto death'* Lazarus was already cold and lifeless!

How would the sisters react to this apparent contradiction? Jesus had declared that Lazarus' sickness was *'not unto death'*, yet at that very moment, the embalmers were wrapping Lazarus' body in grave clothes!

Their reaction emphasises the importance of the spiritual side of life for the disciples of Christ. By listening to and absorbing the word of life, they had learned to trust Jesus. Through what they had seen and heard of Jesus, they knew that he was the Christ, and that to the Son of God, all things were possible. And so, despite



the fact that Lazarus was in the tomb, they dared to believe that his 'sickness was not unto death.'

A First Century rock tomb with movable stone just outside Jerusalem

Martha's hope for the future

After deliberately delaying his journey (verses 6 and 7) Jesus set out for Bethany. The news of his approach was conveyed to the grieving sisters, and we read: *'Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him, but Mary was sitting in the house'* (verse 20). There follows that wonderful exchange between Martha and Jesus. First listen to Martha's confident declaration: *'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'* (verse 21). Despite the apparent hopelessness of

the situation, Martha still had confidence in the power of Jesus. She still dared to hope, for she immediately went on to say *'But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you'* (verse 22).

What evidence did she have for such hope? She may have heard of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Luke 8.40-56) but that little girl had only been dead for a short while. Perhaps she knew of the raising of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7.11-17), but that young man had only been dead a few hours. Lazarus had been dead for four

days and by now decay would be well advanced. Those earlier miracles might have offered crumbs of comfort, but as the days passed without Jesus' arrival, those crumbs of comfort must have turned to ashes of despondency. Then Martha would recall the words Jesus had spoken to the messengers: *'This sickness is not unto death'*. If Jesus' words were true, and they always were, then somehow new vigour must be restored to her brother's lifeless and decaying body.

The true Christian hope of resurrection to eternal life

Jesus confirmed that her hope was not in vain when he said to her *'Your brother will rise again'* (verse 23). But Martha was not sure how to understand this reply. She was confident in a resurrection at the last day (the true Christian hope), but was not sure whether she could hope for an immediate restoration of life for Lazarus. So she confirmed the one thing of which she was sure: *'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day'* (verse 24). Jesus did not state when Martha's hope would be realised; instead he said:

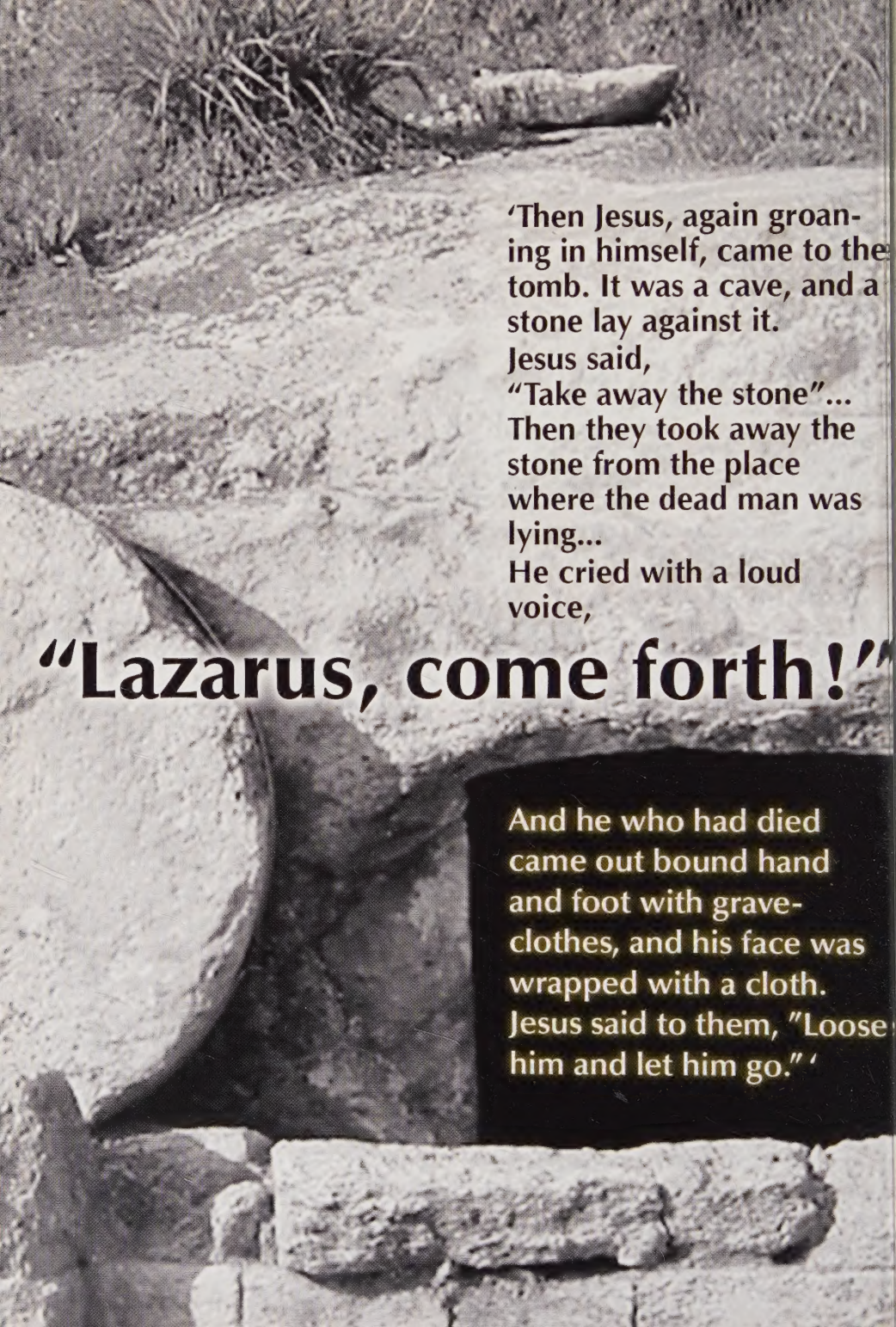
'...I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' (verses 25,26)

We need to ask ourselves whether our hope is the one expressed here by Jesus. He plainly said that those who die in Christ will have to rise again for judgment and reward at the last day – they will not be instantly rewarded with a place in heaven. He also said that those who are alive in Christ at his coming (his return to earth to establish the kingdom of God) will pass straight to judgment and reward without seeing death. These words of Jesus are a wonderfully simple statement of the true Christian hope of eternal life.

The greatest miracle

Afterwards, Mary joined Martha and Jesus and together they made their way to the tomb. Jesus then performed perhaps the greatest of all his miracles. Quite a crowd had gathered round the tomb and before them all Jesus cried out with a loud voice so that all could hear: *'Lazarus, come forth!'* (verse 43). On hearing that command, the tension in the crowd must have been unbearable. What would happen? On one hand the sisters were hoping against hope that their brother would emerge from the tomb. In contrast, the Pharisees and Jewish leaders would be fervently hoping that what they regarded as an outrageous stunt would fall flat on its face!

Was there a delay before there was any indication that Lazarus was



'Then Jesus, again groaning in himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.

Jesus said,
"Take away the stone"...
Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying...

He cried with a loud voice,

"Lazarus, come forth!"

And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him and let him go."

awaking from the sleep of death? How would the onlookers feel when they heard the sound of movement from the depths of the cave? How did Lazarus stand and walk when he was 'bound hand and foot'? Whatever the precise details, it is enough to know that Lazarus did indeed come out of the tomb unaided. And the miracle achieved its purpose because, as a result, we are told that many of the Jews believed on Jesus (verse 45). However, it also provoked the bitter hatred of the chief priests and Pharisees and 'from that day on they plotted to put him to death' (verse 53).

Despite the opposition and danger, the family at Bethany did not cease to show where its loyalty and devotions lay, for John tells us that '*...six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom he had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with him*' (John 12.1, 2). It seems that this was 'a thank you' celebration, and it was not done in secret for we read that '*a great many of the Jews knew that he (Jesus) was there*' (in Bethany – verse 9). Thus the family at Bethany openly declared their allegiance to Christ, despite increasing hostility and hatred from the authorities. Courage and commitment are the hallmarks of faithful discipleship.

Mary's act of devotion

As on the occasion when we meet this family in Luke chapter 10, Martha served at table (verse 2), but this time, it seems that Mary also served: '*Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil*' (verse 3). I think it is not unreasonable to presume that Mary had washed the feet of all the guests bidden to the meal, but demonstrated her special devotion to Jesus by anointing his feet with the precious ointment. Here she is showing us the life of a true believer – a practical demonstration of love prompted by real spiritual insight. Mary and perhaps Mary only, understood that Jesus was to die soon. She knew Jesus was giving himself for her, and so she gave all she had to him.

This act of devotion was greatly appreciated by Jesus. What she did could not diminish the horror of what lay ahead for him; it didn't lessen the brutality of the Roman soldiers or the cruelty of the cross. Nevertheless what she did was a great comfort to Jesus. In a very expressive and profound way, Mary was in effect saying 'I don't fully understand what you are going through, but I care for you and want to share all I have with you'. Jesus died to save people like Mary, and we can be sure that memories of that simple act of devotion helped Jesus through

his agony of mind in Gethsemane and his agony of body at Golgotha. In Mark's gospel record, Jesus says of Mary *'She has done what she could'* (Mark 14.8).

Lessons for today

We must do what we can for Christ while the time and opportunity are with us. Good intentions are not enough. Today, we cannot minister to Christ directly, but we can and must minister to him in a sense, that is to the wider community of believers. Jesus reminded his disciples of this important aspect of their way of life: *'...inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'* (Matthew 25.40).

This conscientious ministration to the body of Christ is what we see demonstrated so powerfully by the family in Bethany. They provided for Jesus' physical needs and they offered spiritual comfort and support as the shadow of the cross grew ever closer. Seeing how Jesus was so greatly encouraged and comforted by that special family must act as an inspiration to all Christ's followers who have believed the gospel, been baptised as he commanded and tried to follow his example in their daily lives.

The lessons are there for us to apply in our individual lives and the way we

interact with one another. We need to learn and apply these lessons, for Jesus will soon return. Then the word will go out to thousands of homes around the globe to call those of his true followers who are still alive. At each of those homes the call will come, just as it did to Mary as she sat in the house at Bethany: *'The Teacher has come and is calling for you'* (John 11.28). Similarly, at the side of countless graves in many countries of the world, the word of command will go out, just as it did in Bethany those many years ago: *'Lazarus, come forth'* (John 11.43).

The question for all readers of this magazine is whether or not we will choose, like the family at Bethany, to be friends and devoted followers of Jesus now. Only then can we hope to hear those words of invitation and command in the day of Jesus' appearing. The promise of Jesus to those he counts as his friends is that, like Mary, Martha and Lazarus, they will sit down with him at a special celebration supper, only this time it will be in the kingdom of God (Revelation 19.9).

Stephen Irving
Norfolk, UK



from the Editor

'In Pursuit of Spring'

Edward Thomas (1878-1917) was arguably one of the most accomplished writers of English rural prose, with a unique poetic-prose style. His reputation rests almost entirely today on his poetry, 144 poems which he wrote in the last two years of his life, between December 1914 and December 1916.

As a prose writer Edward Thomas is often overshadowed by his poetry, but 100 years ago in March 1913, he set off on a cycle ride of personal self-discovery across southern England. In doing so he was hoping to reconnect with the countryside he felt he had become disconnected from, having lived in London for some time. This journey was published in 1914 in his book *'In Pursuit of Spring'* and it remains a poignant reminder of one of our greatest countryside writers, who just

a few years later would die on the battlefields of World War One.

The arrival of springtime in England in 2013 is a welcome relief from the short and often dark days of winter. It has come very late this year with few signs developing until the first week of April, even in the South. Winter has been very slow to relax its grip with deep snow blanketing parts of the UK, cold winds bringing exceptionally low temperatures and nature continuing to hibernate.

There is an eternal push-and-pull relationship between spring and winter. The battle is usually at its fiercest during February, but can last well into April. This is a very late spring indeed. A few trees are in blossom but they are way off coming into leaf. There's absolutely no sign of chestnuts, the bluebells have barely moved, the primroses are very

slow and bird migration is being held back by the northerly winds.

Matthew Oates, a naturalist with the National Trust writes: 'Because spring is so late this year, it could be 'dazzling' when it comes. It certainly will happen. And when it does, it could be absolutely spectacular. It will erupt, we will have lift-off. Everything could come at one time. The danger is that the magnificence of spring will then just run headlong into summer. It may be a case of blink and you miss it!'

As Matthew Oates reminds us, however late it comes – springtime will never fail. It is the season of renewal - of new life springing from the earth in all its varied forms. It reminds us of the Divine promise to make all things new, as we read in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

'For as the earth brings forth its bud, as the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations' (Isaiah 61.11).

'For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind' (Isaiah 65.17).

The words of the prophet are a reminder that God has a plan for this world which He created in all its beautiful diversity – a plan that will be realised as surely as the seasons come and go each year. God's word cannot fail and His promise is just as certain of fulfilment as the arrival of spring. As we look forward then to the coming of springtime, we can also look forward to that time of great joy when God will make all things new and fill the world with His glory.

Jesus himself used this same idea of the regeneration of life in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13.3-23). The gospel of the kingdom of God was the seed sown in the ground. The good ground was the hearts of the believers and the response to the sowing of the gospel 'seed' was a bountiful harvest. Jesus follows his parable with these words:

'Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father'.

(Matthew 13.43).

No wonder springtime brings us such joy and hope for the future!



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Part 10: The Jerusalem Conference

With the spread of the gospel to people outside the Jewish fold, tensions arose as to how far the Law of Moses should apply to people of Gentile origin. Paul and Barnabas, who were instrumental in widening the call to include non-Jews, were sent to Jerusalem to discuss the matter (see Acts 15.1-29).

The agitation that led to the Jerusalem conference struck at the very root of the gospel message. It concerned the basis on which salvation can be obtained. Some said, *'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'* (Acts 15.1). This contention was actually about more than just the rite of circumcision. The rules about Jewish

proselytes in force at the time implied a commitment to keep the Law of Moses in its entirety. This was something that could not be left unanswered because it called into question the whole basis of gospel teaching. Jesus himself had said, *'He who believes and is baptized will be saved'* (Mark 16.16). Belief of the gospel and baptism were required in order to be saved and not adherence to a legal code.

Paul and Barnabas sent to Jerusalem

Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem from Antioch to sort out the matter by conferring with the elders and apostles there. They did not go by sea as they might have done but travelled overland: *'So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria'* (Acts 15.3). This may seem an unnecessary

detail but mention of Phoenicia and Samaria brings significant Biblical connections. In both of these places Jesus himself had preached to Gentiles but on neither occasion was there any suggestion that their salvation was dependent on converting to Judaism and keeping the provisions of the Law of Moses.

The incident concerning a woman who was a Syro-Phoenician, whose daughter had an unclean spirit, is recorded by Mark. She came to Jesus and pleaded with him to 'cast the demon out of her daughter' (Mark 7.26). Jesus said to her: "*Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs.*" And she answered and said to him, "*Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs.*" Then he said to her, "*For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter*" (Mark 7.27-29).

In saying 'Let the children be filled first', Jesus was giving hope to the Gentiles that their turn would come. This indeed was to be the pattern. Paul in his preaching went first to the Jews and then with Barnabas he preached to the Gentiles saying: '*It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.*' (Acts 13.46)

Writing later to the believers at Rome he expressed the principle in these words: '*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek*' (Romans 1.16).

Concerning Samaria, John's gospel records another significant instance of Jesus' dealing with non-Jews. In speaking to a woman of Samaria Jesus said: '*...salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is a spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*' (John 4.22-24). True worship, Jesus was saying, transcended the legal disputes between the Jews and Samaritans.

In these two incidents we have the principles outlined by Jesus as to how his teaching was to develop. Firstly, the gospel was not to be an exclusively Jewish concern but at a certain point in time it would be available to Gentiles in their own right and not merely as converts to Judaism. Secondly, worship in Jerusalem was to cease (John 4.21) and so both Jew and Gentile had to accept a new way of approach to God – '*in spirit and truth*'.

The contention

It was the failure of some to grasp these principles that was the basis of

the Jerusalem conference. Some of those who had come from a Pharisee background contended that all believers must convert to Judaism. They said: *'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.'* (Acts 15.5) This had not been the practice of Paul who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, had taken the gospel to the Gentiles. None had been compelled to be circumcised in order to keep the Law of Moses. Paul himself was a Pharisee and so clearly understood the principles at stake.

The circumstances of this agitation were not as straightforward as may at first be imagined. There was a hidden agenda at work here. Paul gave his own fuller account of this dispute in his letter to the Galatians. There we learn that these people from a Pharisee background were not genuinely seeking truth. They were in fact spies with a plan of campaign to undermine the faith of Christ's followers. He described them like this: *'...false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage)'* (Galatians 2.4). These were serious charges that Paul made against these people. This was in fact the first appearance of the 'judaising' faction which went on to cause turmoil wherever they surfaced and set

themselves in opposition to the work of the Apostle Paul.

Peter's speech

After much disputation in the conference Peter stood up and recounted his part in the original conversion of Gentiles. He said: *'Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith'* (Acts 15.7-9).

Peter was referring here to the incident where he had been speaking to a Gentile audience and dramatically the Holy Spirit came to them: *'While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.'* (Acts 10.44,45). For those that had witnessed this scene there was no doubt as to its significance. The Gentiles could receive the gospel on an equal basis to the Jews. *'Then Peter answered, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have*

received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ (Acts 10.46, 47)

The speech of Peter recounting this event to the assembly proved a turning point. He went on to say: *‘Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they’ (Acts 15.10, 11).*

James’ speech

The intervention of Peter settled the meeting down and was followed by a period of quiet which gave an opportunity for an explanation of what had actually been achieved by Barnabas and Paul on what is now known as Paul’s first journey (see previous article in Light Volume 24.1). *‘Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles’ (Acts 15.12).* It appears that the meeting was chaired by James, who was Jesus’ half-brother, and he offered a summing up of the proceedings. He started by pointing out the pivotal work of Peter when the gospel was first taken to the Gentiles. The words he uses are noteworthy: *‘Simon (Peter) has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name’ (Acts 15.14).* They

were taken *‘out of the Gentiles’*, in other words they were separated from the Gentiles by belief of the gospel, which is the Biblical pattern.

Paul used the phrase *‘separated to the gospel’* in Romans 1.1 and in Acts 19 we read how Paul separated those who would be believers from those who would not. In writing to the Corinthians, who were overwhelmingly of Gentile origin, Paul exhorted them to *‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you’ (2 Corinthians 6.17).* Although they were never told to take on all the legal aspects of Judaism, the knowledge and belief of the gospel was to separate them from the Gentiles. They had taken on *‘the hope of Israel’ (Acts 28.20)* but not its laws.

James went on to point out that not only had the Holy Spirit sanctioned the call of the Gentiles but that it was also the subject of Bible prophecy. He quoted these words from the prophet Amos: *‘...So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by my name’ (Acts 15.17 - see Amos 9.12).*

The resolution

Having thus spoken James then put forward a resolution to clarify the issue:

'Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath'

(Acts 15.19-21).

We should note from the final words of James that these things were deemed necessary to avoid offence to

The scroll of the Law (Torah) being read aloud in the synagogue with the help of a 'yad' (a special pointer).

Jewish sensitivities and not of doctrinal necessity. This view is consistent with the teaching found in Paul's letters. For example in 1 Corinthians 8, in answer to the question about eating meat offered in sacrifices to idols, he said that it was a matter of personal conscience but great care must be taken to avoid offence to fellow believers. The question of eating blood or things strangled was deemed not to be a doctrinal question but one of expediency when Paul wrote to the Romans: *'for the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'* (Romans 14.17). The offence to observant Jewish believers



disappeared in time, just as Jesus had envisaged when speaking to the woman of Samaria. For none could keep the law after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple in AD 70 (see picture opposite).

A difficulty

This view however presents us with a difficulty. Whilst some of the prohibitions might be seen in this light, surely the need to abstain from sexual immorality cannot be merely to avoid upsetting the Jews! It is quite simply a matter of right and wrong. To meet such a clear objection some seek to change Paul's advice saying that all these injunctions are requirements for believers today including abstaining from blood.

The answer to this apparent problem lies in what is meant in this passage by the term '*sexual immorality*'. The original Greek word used here '*porneia*' bears a limited technical meaning when used in the context of the Law of Moses as it surely is here. Before we explore the connection with the Law perhaps we can look at the letter which the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church wrote to all the congregations of believers. It concluded with these words: '*...For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and*

from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell' (Acts 15.28, 29).

We note that the order of the prohibitions was altered slightly in the letter compared to the spoken words of James. The idol sacrifices and the blood now head the list. This revised order was retained when later on the list it was repeated (Acts 21.25). The reason for the change we suggest is this. These prohibitions are taken from the book of Leviticus and in writing formally they wished to put them in the order in which they appear in the Law. Thus we see a prohibition on:

- ❖ 'things offered to demons (idols)' in Leviticus 17.7-9
- ❖ 'blood' in Leviticus 17.10-12
- ❖ 'things strangled' in Leviticus 17.13-16 (whilst strangling is not specifically mentioned, the hunting of birds implies it)

This then leaves us with the fourth prohibition of the elders and apostles translated '*sexual immorality*' in English. The corresponding fourth prohibition in the Law which follows on directly from those already listed is what is literally termed '*matters of nakedness*'. It concerns forbidden unions for marriage. For example they were forbidden to marry their father's sister or brother, or their mother's sister or brother nor were they to marry a widowed daughter-in-law.



With the destruction of Herod's temple in AD 70, keeping the Law of Moses with its daily sacrifices was no longer possible

Thus we have what is termed 'sexual immorality' in Leviticus 18.1- 18.

This then resolves the difficulty. The prohibition does not involve sexual immorality as we would ordinarily understand the term, but the strict legal code of persons forbidden to marry. It was the breaching of this Jewish code that was likely to cause offence to observant Jews. Sexual morality in the general sense is altogether a separate thing and would in any case have been an issue well understood by believers in the gospel.

Formal advice issued

The decision of the conference was sent back to the church (ecclesia) at Antioch, who had sent Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem. A letter was also

composed at the same time explaining their decision and was sent to all the ecclesias affected by the dispute. The letter clearly endorsed the work of Paul and Barnabas taking the gospel message to the Gentiles and made clear that those who contended against them had not been authorised by the believers at Jerusalem and were indeed subversive to the gospel.

Advice for first century believers

This advice clearly set out a position in relation to the Gentile believers. It was basically a concession aimed at avoiding offence to observant Jews who had accepted the gospel. It was essentially a temporary measure, of use whilst the temple stood. Once the temple was removed (in the express purpose of God it should be noted) the Law of Moses could no longer be kept, for it demanded worship in the place of God's choosing. The

concession itself did not solve the problem of the agitation which continued and indeed developed. It did however set a standard upon which all could work and the peace which ensued enabled the gospel to be spread further by the work of Paul and his companions.

There was a sense of great relief felt back at Antioch when they received the news of the decision. A problem that had threatened to divide the unity which should characterise Christ's disciples had been removed. The work could continue and so the episode concludes: *'...they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement'* (Acts 15.30, 31).

Advice for twenty-first century believers

We have noted how the apostles managed to avert the first major doctrinal controversy in the first century church. Jesus had taken away the need for adherence to the Law of Moses as Paul later wrote to the Colossians: *'having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us...And he has taken it (the Law of Moses) out of the way, having nailed it to the cross'* (Colossians 2.14).

However, the matter sadly did not go away. It was one of a number of false ideas that undermined the simplicity

of the gospel message as taught by Jesus and the apostles. The unity of the believers was compromised and this led to factions and divisions in the church. At the end of a life of tireless efforts to maintain purity of doctrine in the early churches, Paul warned Timothy that *'the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables'* (2 Timothy 4.3,4).

This is the situation that prevails in the many churches of Christendom today – they are divided in so many matters of doctrine and practice. They can't all be right so we urge you to study the Bible with an unfettered mind and test your beliefs against the clear teaching of God's Word. Let Paul's warning and exhortation to Timothy be your guide:

'But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 3.13-15).

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“Goodnight, sleep tight...”

Every night probably millions of children throughout the English-speaking world are tucked up in bed with these familiar words. And this has been going on for generations. The world changes out of all recognition, but the nightly ritual changes not.

Just how long this little ritual has been going on is indicated by the fact that one of the words used is completely obsolete today. The word ‘tight’ in this context means ‘whole, complete, unbroken’ and goes right back to Middle English and the days of Geoffrey Chaucer over 600 years ago.

So where is the Biblical connection? That ‘goodnight’ ritual often includes another phrase: ‘mind the bugs don’t bite’. This may seem like a bit of irrelevant nonsense to most of us today, although I understand from a recent report that bedbugs are on the

increase (‘You and Yours’ BBC Radio 4 17/09/12) so perhaps this does have some contemporary relevance! But here is the interesting bit: it is quite likely that, if this word ‘bugs’ goes back as far as the word ‘tight’, it originally meant something entirely different, something with a very definite Biblical connection.

In 1535 Miles Coverdale published his new translation of the Bible into English, a version that later became known as the ‘**Bug Bible**’. Many of these early English translations were given popular nicknames over the years, usually based on one particularly odd or noteworthy verse. Probably the most famous of these is the ‘Breeches Bible’ of 1579, so-called because of its rendering of Genesis 3.7 where it says that Adam and Eve made themselves ‘breeches’ of fig leaves (King James Version ‘aprons’ – the basic idea is a

covering of some sort. 'Breeches' is an old name for trousers, rarely used today except maybe jokingly).

Another well-known example is the so-called 'Printer's Bible' of 1612, in which Psalm 119.161 includes the misprint *'Printers have persecuted me without a cause'* ('printers' should read 'princes'!).

Returning to James Coverdale's '**Bug Bible**', this was so-called because of its translation of Psalm 91.5: *'Thou shalt not need to be afraid for any bugs by night'* (spelling modernised). The King James Version uses the word '*terror*' in place of '*bugs*', but the meaning is basically the same – at the time (1536) the word 'bug' referred to 'a spectre that haunts, or a ghost'. The Psalmist is saying that those who place their trust in God have no need to fear the nameless terrors of the night (or anything else for that matter).

The deep darkness of night can sometimes inspire a nameless dread and foreboding in even the strongest of us, and children are particularly vulnerable. Any parent who has seen their child trapped in a 'night terror', a nightmare that continues even when the child is woken, knows how distressing it is and how powerless one feels to help. So maybe the 'bugs' of our 'goodnight' ritual were originally the terrors of the night – and this was a genuine prayer that the child

would both sleep soundly ('tight'), and be protected from the fears and dread of the dark. Then, as the English language changed and this use of the word 'bug' became obsolete, the less dreadful bedbugs took over at a time when they were a very real experience.

Those of us who are parents know how much we would do to protect our children from harm, and how much they respond to our care and love for them. The writer of that same Psalm, Psalm 91, says that God is the same – if we recognise and love Him as our divine parent He protects and cares for us. The words of that Psalm are applied in the New Testament particularly to the Father's care for His Son Jesus (compare verse 12 with Matthew 4.6), but God's loving care extends to all His children who honour and obey Him. And it is His pleasure in the end to save us from the deep and eternal darkness of death itself:

'When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.'

(Psalm 91.15,16 ESV)

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BIBLE
TEACHING
ABOUT:

God's covenant with Abraham

The name 'Abraham' is likely to bring to mind the top-hat and whiskered face of Abraham Lincoln, arguably the most famous President of the United States of America. But the origins of this name are not as well known today as they were when Mr Lincoln was named.

The name 'Abraham' appears in the book of Genesis and the man behind the name is called 'our father Abraham' by the Jews and is described as a friend of God (2 Chronicles 20.7). In addition, the name of that same man Abraham appears over seventy times in the New Testament. He is mentioned in the lineage of Jesus Christ and referred to by Jesus a number of times. He is named by Luke in his book entitled 'The Acts of the

Apostles'; by Paul in his letters to the Romans, Galatians and Hebrews, and by James and Peter in their letters. Clearly, the man called Abraham was an important person not only to the Jews, but to Jesus who was himself a Jew and to the early Christians. But is he still relevant to Christians today?

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Abraham and the covenant that God made with him are as important to Christian belief now, as they were in the minds of Jesus and the apostles. Every serious Christian will discover amazing insights into God's plan by learning more about Abraham and the everlasting covenant that God made with him.

A Brief History Lesson

To set the context for our comments, we will briefly review some of the background about Abraham and list in a table the promises that were made to

him as part of God's covenant (see opposite).

Abraham's family tree can be confusing at first glance, but for our purposes we simply need to know three generations: grandfather (Abraham), son (Isaac) and grandson (Jacob)(see Genesis 25.19-26). From these three men sprang the nation of Israel, the history of which is the subject of most of the Old Testament. Abraham was also the father of many Arab nations through his other wives' children but our focus in this article is the covenant relating to Isaac who was born to Sarah.

Abraham, originally called Abram until God changed his name (Genesis 17.5) was born 292 years after the flood that Noah had survived with his wife, three sons and their wives. He was descended from Noah's son Shem (hence the description 'Semitic') and at the time of his birth all nine of his ancestors from Noah to Terah (his father) were still living. This is recorded in Genesis chapter 11 and the importance of this information is that Abraham would be very well aware of God's interaction with mankind and the concept of faith.

God's covenant with Abraham still relevant today

Having established the historical context of Abraham, the importance to

Christians is that the covenant of God with Abraham was the foundation of the gospel message – the 'Good News' that Jesus preached. In other words, Abraham was the man selected by God to be the vehicle by which God's plan to save mankind was enacted.

This point cannot be over-emphasised; it was to Abraham that God's plan was revealed, and through Abraham that it came to pass. The beliefs and the hope of Christians are based on the covenant made with Abraham. This allows us to understand two fundamental components of those beliefs which are:

- ❖ How we can be saved from death
- ❖ What the future holds for this earth

Covenant Details

Before we turn to the New Testament to examine the two statements above, let's consider a few aspects of the covenant. The essential components of the promises to Abraham that comprise the covenant are:

- ❖ That Abraham would have a son (despite the advanced age of both him and Sarah) through whom a great nation would emerge;
- ❖ That Abraham's descendants would possess the land from Egypt to the river Euphrates;
- ❖ That through Abraham all nations of the earth would be blessed.

Reference	Age	Event	Promises to Abraham
Gen.12.1-4	75	Abram leaves Haran & travels to Canaan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to become a great nation to be blessed all families on earth to be blessed in him
Gen.15	85*	Abram in Canaan – vision from God – takes part in covenant ceremony <i>* approximate age</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to have an heir from his own body descendants to be as numerous as the stars descendants to possess the land land defined as from Egypt to Euphrates
Gen.16.1-4	86	Abram becomes father of Ishmael by Hagar, Sarah's maid	
Gen.17	99	LORD appears to him – names changed – sign of circumcision – Sarah to have a son, Isaac	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promise of numerous descendants restated future inheritance of land of Canaan restated
Gen.21	100	Isaac born to Sarah	
Gen.22	115*	Isaac offered to God <i>* approximate age</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> blessing of numerous descendants restated blessings of all nations through his seed restated
Gen 23.1	137	Sarah dies	
Gen 24.67	140	Isaac marries Rebekah	
Gen 25	160	Jacob & Esau born	
Gen 25	175	Abraham dies	

Now, the word 'covenant' when used in the Bible is associated with the idea of 'cutting in two' (Strong's Hebrew Dictionary No. H1285). This is because when an agreement was made, an animal would be cut in two and both parties would walk between the parts of the animal (see Jeremiah 34.18,19). The animal sacrifice was an essential part of the covenant agreement – and the parties recognised that, if they failed to keep the terms of the covenant, they would share the fate of the sacrifice. Let's take a look at the details of the particular covenant that God made with Abraham, as described in Genesis chapter 15:

'Then he said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it." And he said, "Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" So he said to him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other...' (Genesis 15.7-10).

'And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there was a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces' (Genesis 15. 17).

An interesting aspect of this covenant is that it was binding on just one party

– the Lord God. Only the Lord walked between the cut animals; Abraham did not. This means that the promises of this covenant were not conditional on Abraham but as they were promised by God, they would be fulfilled and this clearly shows God's intentions in the three aspects of the covenant we listed above.

Consider for a moment the point of conditionality. A covenant where both parties commit to fulfilling certain actions is obviously conditional on both. A covenant where a single party commits to fulfilling certain actions is therefore not dependent on the other party's action. Abraham, for whatever reason, was a man who exemplified the quality of faith that God desires, and it was because he *'believed in the LORD, and he accounted it to him for righteousness'* (Genesis 15. 6) that he was suitable to be the man through whom God's purpose would be revealed.

Now, as a contrast, look at the covenant made to the descendants of Abraham centuries later as recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 11 verse 26 onwards and in Deuteronomy chapter 28. We won't print the verses here, but look at them*and notice the promise and the condition. If the Israelites obeyed God, then blessings would result, whereas if they did not, then they would be cursed. The history of the Jews in the Old Testament is

witness to this conditional promise, and the results. But the promises in the covenant made with Abraham were to be fulfilled. It was God's intention that His plan would proceed through this man who lived by faith. As we shall see, it was and still is the quality of faith that reveals God's plan to whoever desires to be part of it.

A Covenant of Faith

So let us return to the specific promises and see just how connected they are to the Christian hope. We can start with Paul's letter to the Christians in Galatia. In this letter, Paul states quite plainly:

'And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed"' (Galatians 3.8).

Here is a direct link to the third promise outlined above. Paul argues that the gospel was preached to Abraham. The 'gospel' or good news includes a blessing on 'all the nations' – not just on the natural descendants of Abraham. How was the promised blessing fulfilled? Paul continues: '...that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith' (Galatians 3.14).

Jesus Christ, then is the focal point of the blessing to all nations; he was the fulfilment of the promise that by Abraham's 'seed' the nations would be blessed. Paul explains that the 'seed' referred to Christ:

'Now to Abraham and his seed, were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your seed," who is Christ.'

(Galatians 3.16)

Without doubt then, Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of that promise to Abraham.

God promised Abraham that through him 'ALL NATIONS' would be blessed. This has not yet been fulfilled



This letter that Paul wrote to the Galatians is one which deals mainly with a problem that many of the Jewish Christians were facing at the time. As the natural sons of Abraham, there was a great deal of pressure on them to try and fit the requirements of the Law given to Moses in with everyday Christian living (see article on page 11). This letter is a resounding rebuke to that idea. Paul puts the matter to rest by declaring that it was *'by faith'* that Abraham was considered righteous, not *'by works'*, meaning observance of laws and regulations.

So we see clearly here the link between Abraham's faith and being made righteous before God. Through faith we receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ, just as through faith Abraham was considered righteous. Abraham understood by the promises made to him that faith would result in a blessing not only to his descendants, but to all nations. That Abraham understood this is clearly taught by Jesus himself, when in an argument with the Jews of his day he said: *'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad'* (John 8.56).

Abraham understood that it was faith that would save him; and he saw that redemption would come through faith. That redemptive process is what happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. True Christians today then, are linked

through common faith with Abraham, to the promises made to him:

'For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ... And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.' (Galatians 3.26-29)

'Heirs according to the promise'

Now since we have seen that as Christians we are heirs of Abraham and the promises to him, what then can we expect as heirs? The third promise outlined above has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, what remains of the first two? What about the promise that a great nation would emerge?

Quite clearly this has partially been fulfilled in two ways. Firstly, the children of Abraham do number in the millions, as the stars of the heavens. The second way this has come to pass is that the spiritual children of Abraham, the children and heirs by faith are a large and growing 'spiritual nation'. Has either of them become great? Not particularly. Most of the natural and spiritual children of Abraham, including Abraham, Isaac



Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948. The new nation of Israel is not the final fulfilment of the promise to Abraham

and Jacob themselves, are no longer living. They are dead.

This is where another great Christian hope ties in with the promises of God to Abraham. God covenanted with Abraham that his children, natural and spiritual, would be blessed. This means that the dead must be resurrected! Resurrection then was also part of the gospel to Abraham.

As Jesus clearly explained when questioned by some who doubted the resurrection, he said:

'Now even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". For he is not the God of the dead but of the living...' (Luke 20.37, 38).

We can see quite clearly that the promise of the great nation, while partially fulfilled, is yet to be fully realised because the resurrection of Abraham and the faithful who have long since died has yet to occur. The hope of the resurrection then, is another component of the covenant, critical to Christian understanding.

Finally then, what of the second promise listed above? Have the

descendants of Israel inherited the land from Egypt to the Euphrates? Has this promise been fulfilled? Again, it was partially fulfilled back in the days of the kings of Israel. However that dynasty lasted only a few hundred years before failing. In the last 65 years we have seen a new nation of Israel come into being. But this too, is not the final fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. We know this because firstly it is not a kingdom, having no king. Secondly, the natural and spiritual heirs have not been raised from the dead to receive this promise. This future kingdom, then, is a pillar of Christian belief that we can hold onto today – the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, as Jesus proclaimed, and which is open for all those to enter who try to imitate the faith of Abraham.

Conclusion

Although we have but scratched the surface of this topic (the reader should further consider Paul's letter to the Romans, especially chapters four and five on this subject) we hope to have demonstrated the link between God's covenant with Abraham, and the beliefs and hopes of true Christians.

At the outset we stated that understanding God's covenant with Abraham would reveal insights into how we can be saved from death and what is to be the future of the earth. Through the words of Jesus and Paul

we have seen that the covenant God made with Abraham addresses both aspects very clearly:

- ❖ **Salvation is by faith;** Abraham was made righteous by faith; Christians are made righteous by faith in Jesus; both will inherit eternal life.
- ❖ **The kingdom of God** will be established again on this earth, populated by the spiritual heirs of that Promised Land, including those who belong to Christ.

God's covenant to Abraham shows us that His plan for the redemption of man has been steadily unfolding through four thousand years of human history and it declares to the faithful what will happen in the future.

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The period Between the Testaments

The Old Testament closes with the book of Malachi but the exact date of writing is unknown. We know from the prophet's references to the temple and the priests that Malachi lived after the rebuilding of the temple around 516BC.

In the first chapter of this prophecy there is reference to the governor and this is generally recognised as the Persian ruler (Malachi 1.8). The state of affairs during the prophet's ministry was similar to that described at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Various commentators agree that the date of writing was around 460BC.

The gospel record of Matthew is the first of the New Testament books and is reckoned to have been written towards the middle of the first century AD. It takes up the narrative with the events surrounding Christ's miraculous conception and birth. At the time of Jesus, the Jews were under the control of Rome with an army of occupation in the land and an uneasy

relationship existing between the Romans and the Jews. During this period there was dual authority over the land with the Jewish leaders being responsible for the general religious and moral laws of the people and the Romans providing their own legal framework to control the conquered land.

Herod the Great was prefect of Galilee and his family was from Idumaea (Edom) although they converted to Judaism. The Romans had appointed his grandfather Antipas governor of Idumaea and Julius Caesar made his father Antipater procurator of Judea in 47BC. The Roman senate appointed Herod the Great king of Judea in 37BC and he died in 4BC. There were five Roman governors in office during the period covered by the New Testament namely Rufus, Gratus, Pilate, Felix and Festus.

If you are familiar with the prophecy of Daniel, you will know that chapter two refers to a great metallic image which represented four great Empires. These had rule over the land of Israel, beginning with Babylon then Medo-Persia, Greece and finally Rome.

The Hellenistic period

The prophet Malachi lived towards the end of the period of Persian supremacy, but the Gospel writer Matthew lived at the time of the Roman occupation. The time period between the Old and New Testaments lasted about 460 years. Part of this was under Greek domination and is called the Hellenistic period, (see chart on facing page). This was represented by the belly and thighs of brass – part of Nebuchadnezzar's image in Daniel's prophecy. Greek domination of the ancient world lasted from the time of Alexander for about three hundred years until the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30BC. During this time there were no prophets through whom God would communicate to His people. There were no new revelations for the faithful to cling to but they were not forgotten or forsaken in the Divine plan.

The long period from the message of Jesus to John in Revelation (the last book of the New Testament) down to our day has some similarities for believers. Both the Old and New Testaments tell us about God's promises and the coming of the Messiah and contain the inspired writings to provide us with information on

which we must hope and be patient. This was the message of James to believers in the first century: *'Therefore be patient therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord'* (James 5.7).

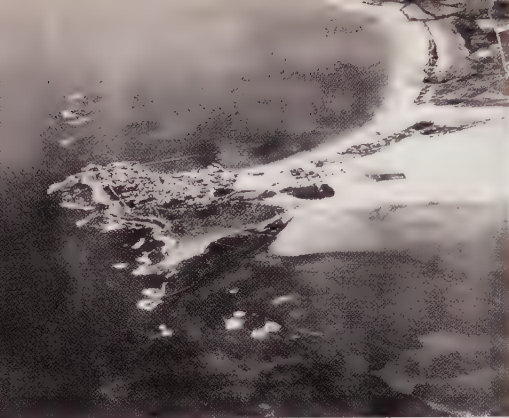
Alexander the Great

The period of Grecian domination saw the rise of Alexander the Great (see cover inset) and the first Greek victory over Persia was fought outside a place called Marathon. From there a runner was sent to bring the news to the Greeks in Athens, where he died after he had given his account. This event forms the basis of the modern marathon race which is just over 26 miles long, the same distance covered by the Greek runner.

The Persian army's ships beached on the shore before the battle of Marathon – reconstruction



Period	Date BC	Event
PERSIAN 450-330 BC	460*	The Prophet Malachi
HELLENISTIC 330-166 BC	334 323 312 311 223 198	Alexander the Great begins the conquest of the East Death of Alexander – Empire divided Ptolemy I conquers Jerusalem Seleucus conquers Babylon Antiochus III (the Great) becomes Seleucid ruler of Syria Antiochus defeats Egypt and gains control of Palestine
HASMONEAN 166-63 BC	175 166 142 134 103	Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) rules Syria Mattathias and his sons rebel against Antiochus. Maccabean revolt begins under leadership of Judas Maccabeus. Jonathan is high priest. Simon becomes high priest and establishes Hasmonean dynasty. John Hyrcanus enlarges the independent Jewish state. Alexander Jannaeus' begins to rule.
ROMAN 63 BC....	63 37 19 4* 26 AD* 58* 70 96*	Pompey invades Palestine. Herod the Great rules subject to Rome Herod's temple begun in Jerusalem Birth of Christ Christ's mission begins. Gospel of Matthew completed Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus Apostle John receives the Revelation <i>* date approximate</i>



Aerial view of Tyre (Lebanon) taken in 1934 clearly shows the ancient island city. The neck of land linking it to the mainland was a causeway built by Alexander the Great in his capture of the city, as described by the prophet Ezekiel

Ezekiel's prophecy refers to the destruction of the city of Tyre (Ezekiel chapter 26). This was fulfilled when Alexander used the remains of old mainland Tyre to create a causeway to the island fortress of new Tyre, which took seven months to complete. Ezekiel tells us that it was Nebuchadnezzar who, some 250 years earlier, destroyed old Tyre on the mainland after a siege of 13 years. It was the rubble from this event that was so cleverly used by Alexander to reach the island. We read in Ezekiel chapter 26: *'And they shall destroy the walls of Tyre...I will also scrape her dust from her, and make her like the top of a rock...they will lay your stones, your timber, and your soil in the midst of the water'* (Ezekiel 26.4, 12).

After this Alexander the Great moved down the coast and totally destroyed Gaza. At the same time he had his eyes firmly set on Jerusalem and sent a notice to its leaders that the city would be his next conquest. We read from contemporary sources that the

people were alarmed and Jaddua, the High Priest at Jerusalem, at first protested but later claimed to have had a vision from God. His solution was to hang garlands around the city, throw open the gates on the approach of Alexander and his army, and go out to meet the enemy in his priestly robes with the priests in ceremonial attire all dressed in white.

This they did and to everyone's surprise Alexander fell prostrate in adoration and when one of his close aides asked him why, he replied that he worshipped not the high priest, but his God, and then claimed to have seen a vision of this event before he left Greece.

The historian Josephus tells us that the High Priest talked to Alexander about the prophecies of Daniel and how Greece was destined to succeed Persia. As a result it is claimed that Judea escaped from any tax in the form of tribute money, although some cast doubt on the facts as being partly a legend built up by the Jews.

Later Alexander's exploits took him down into Egypt and it is accepted that he removed 100,000 Jews into his new

colony in Egypt. He had a great influence on Middle Eastern culture. The Old Testament Scriptures were translated into Greek in Alexandria, Ptolemy Philadelphus sponsoring the Septuagint version of the Bible. In the book of Daniel we find a prophecy about the conquests of Alexander the Great and his successors (Daniel chapter 8). He died in 323BC at the age of 32 and the kingdom was divided between his four generals as the prophet Daniel had foretold.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes

After Alexander's death the area of Judea came under the control of one of his generals. Later the Greek ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes took Jerusalem and for many years the Jews were pawns in a tug of war between

Egypt and Syria as the power of Greece receded.

Two notable events occurred at this time when the Greeks tried to enter the temple in Jerusalem against the religious laws of the Jews. Antiochus persisted and while trying to cross the inner court of the temple he fell down and was carried away half dead. Some time later when an official was sent by the Greeks to assess the wealth in the temple, he was terror struck by an awful vision and withdrew, coming to the conclusion that the temple was protected by a power greater than any man!

Antiochus also made decrees which were impossible for the Jews to accept, commanding them to pay homage to idols and to eat swine's flesh. He also destroyed copies of the Torah (the Law of Moses). The death penalty was pronounced on any who would not accept these decrees.

Coin of Antiochus Epiphanes. The Greek inscription on the reverse reads:

'...Antiochus, God manifest, Bearer of Victory'



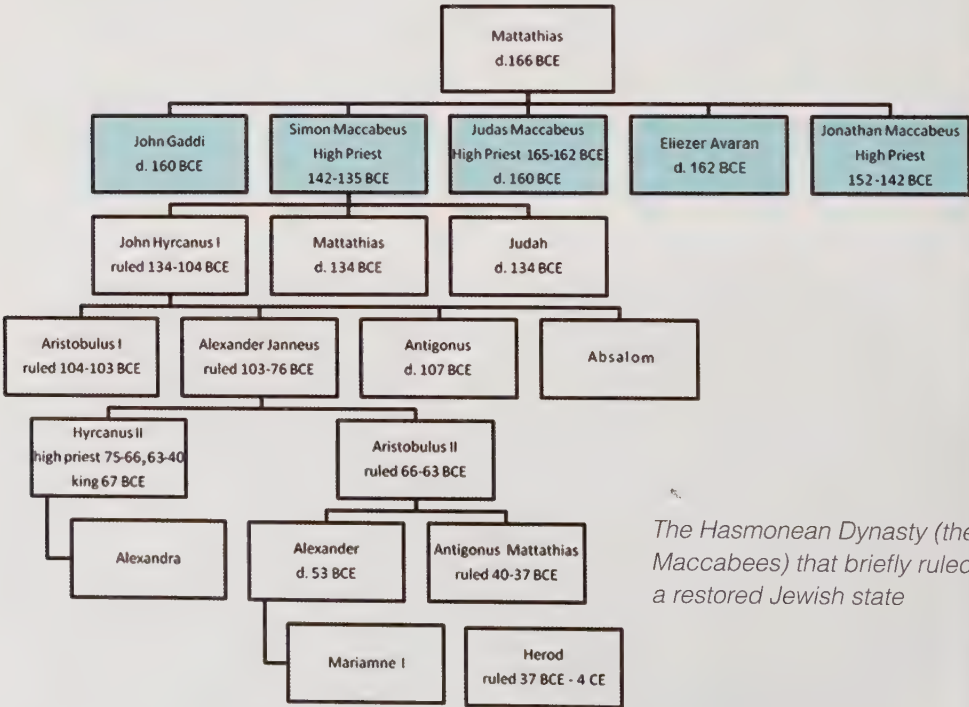
Antiochus even sold the high priesthood to the highest bidder, one Menelaus, who was not entitled to it and in 168BC his nominee was ejected.

The Jewish uprising

These events resulted in a Jewish backlash which was brought about by the Hasmonaeans under Mattathias and his sons who are better known as the Maccabees. Mattathias was a priest descended from Phinehas the son of Eleazer of the family of Aaron and they lived in a city called Modein. What Antiochus had underestimated was the resilience and fanatical dedication of the Hasidim (or men of the

covenant). Mattathias openly rejected the Greek decrees and this led to a rebellion by the Jews under Mattathias, with his sons summoning other citizens to join them in their uprising.

The five sons of Mattathias were John, Simon, Judas, Eliezer and Jonathan (see below) They went to the Judean hills which were well suited to guerrilla warfare and their numbers greatly increased. However on one occasion 1,000 of their number were killed in a cave on the Sabbath day, as they did not wish to pick up their weapons and defend themselves on such a holy day.



The Hasmonean Dynasty (the Maccabees) that briefly ruled a restored Jewish state

The result of this was that they changed their strict religious observance and waged guerrilla warfare in the towns and cities. They took their warfare in a more open style to the enemy and their numbers increased to over 6,000. A successful battle brought about the rout of Antiochus' army which enabled the Jews to gain possession of Jerusalem. Their independence lasted for some 23 years until 63 BC. Their main victory is celebrated annually by a feast which occurs in December called Chanukah and is referred to in the gospel record of John as '*the Feast of Dedication*' (John 10. 22).

The Roman period

So in the terms of Daniel's prophecy the iron legs of the image emerged as the power of Rome and they became the dominant ruler (Daniel 2.40). Under their rule the time arrived in the Divine plan for Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, to be born and for the events of his life, death and resurrection to take place in fulfilment of the words of the Old Testament prophets.

In the first century AD, the Roman Empire brought a period of comparative peace and stability. The Empire was linked by a vast network



The special 9-branched menorah (candlestick) associated with Chanukah, the Festival of Lights

of roads (see overleaf) and Greek was the common language. The ideal time had arrived for Christianity to take root through the work of the apostles and become established throughout Asia Minor reaching into Europe and North Africa.

We see that events in Israel changed rapidly during the period between the Testaments and it was only the zeal of some Jews in the land that kept them separate and full of hope, clinging to the words of their Old Testament prophets.

As we have seen from this summary, the period of time between the Testaments was very eventful. Although there were recorded books or accounts these were not



considered to be inspired writings. These ancient records give some insight into the events which occurred during this period. They include the books of the Maccabees which were added to the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. However these are now excluded from many modern translations of the Bible and are included in the Apocrypha which is not regarded by most authorities as part of the inspired Word of God.

A message for today

The events which took place were in accordance with prophecies made many years before, like those in the book of Daniel around 600BC. This gives us great confidence that God's hand is in control of international events which affect His chosen people Israel and also all those who have faith

Roman road near Antioch, Syria. These newly-built roads were very important to the rapid spread of Christianity

in His promises and commit their way to following Jesus.

Just as the Old Testament prophets looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, let us do the same in confidence, remembering the words which the Apostle Paul addressed to the Greeks of his day in Athens:

'...he (God) has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17.31).

John Carpenter
Kent, England

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